'I'm a trainee teacher get me out of here': Does reality TV have a place in Initial Teacher Training?
Paper presented at the 1st TEAN conference 2009, Glasgow Caledonian University
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Keyword: Video conferencing

The attraction of reality TV may be that instant contact with what is happening right now. It may be the ability to get a really good view of the detail both visually and auditorily. It may be that added possibility of interacting with those involved in the TV programme. So do all these benefits have a place in initial teacher training? I am subject leader for Science PGCE at Bishop Grosseteste University College and I have been looking for ways to ensure the training provided is up to date and combines academic rigour with what is going on in the classroom. One of our mentors Jenny Dobbs at Cherry Willingham Community School teaches on the PGCE and it was with her that we developed and tried out a new idea of using a video link to contribute to an understanding of both planning and Assessment for Learning.

We started by looking at the literature to see what other people were doing in the field. We found that the most common use for video conferencing in the context of initial teacher training was to aid in trainee placement supervision (Garrett and Dudt, 1998) and for communication between trainees when on placement (Hu and Wong, 2006). However there was some work on developing Maths subject knowledge (Coyle, 2004) but this did not involve the kind of pattern of video conferencing use we intended to develop. Our plan was based on the perceived need to make less distinct the boundaries between training in the University College and the placement school. This developed further into defining the aims for the study as developing the transition of ITT trainees into school based environments, group cohesion in regard to lesson planning and AfL (Assessment for Learning) practice and the application of theory into practice for trainee teachers.

The study was based at Cherry Willingham community school and a group of 22 Science trainees were bussed to the school. Cherry Willingham has extremely good video link hardware set up within the school by the Lincoln 7 Specialist Schools Group. On the first occasion the group was able to jointly plan a lesson with Jenny being able to see how an experienced teacher considers each aspect of planning using the school scheme of work, National Curriculum guidelines, government strategies and exam board documentation. The ability to consider all these aspects of planning is a difficult thing for a new trainee but actually being in the school and seeing the realities of the process first hand was a real advantage. They then left the laboratory and were able to see how the session developed by watching the implementation of the planning in the laboratory on a

large plasma screen in the library. Following the lesson the trainees were able to jointly evaluate the effectiveness of the planning with Jenny. This made it possible to consider issues like behaviour problems, technology not working as well as it might, timing and flexibility. In other words the reality of dealing with the practical issues of how well a plan actually can work in the realities of the laboratory.

About two weeks later the trainees returned to Cherry Willingham Community School and followed the same pattern but this time with the focus on Assessment for Learning. They were able to look at the lesson plan which had already been outlined and identify opportunities for Assessment for Learning within the confines of that particular lesson. This gave them an understanding of the importance of assessment in the whole process of teaching and how it can be monitored to ensure that it actually is taking place and even more how assessment can be used as an integral part of the learning process. A variety of methods were identified for this lesson based particularly on peer assessment. The students then watched the outcomes of the implementation on the lesson, monitoring it on the plasma screen in the library and then returned to talk to Jenny about how well it had worked afterwards.

Evaluations of this whole process by trainees were extremely positive. Comments included: ‘It gave insight into how to deliver a structured lesson’; ‘It linked theory to practice in a realistic way’; and, overall, ‘It was a very valuable and memorable experience’. To summarise, trainees valued such early opportunities to see the reality of Science teaching in a partnership school. They also highly valued the idea of seeing the impact of what seems to them very much theoretical concepts impacting directly within a classroom setting. Again they liked the joint thinking process with an experienced teacher. It gave them confidence to see how planning and Assessment for Learning could be implemented later on a more individual basis in their placement schools. For me this enhanced the progressive process of moving trainees from having very little knowledge of teaching and learning in schools to actually becoming effective reflective practitioners and it made them more ready to face the rigours of their first teaching placement.

As Jenny and I evaluated the process in more detail we felt that trainees were helped to make some small but significant steps to teaching. The process of training theoretically in the first weeks of a PGCE becomes far more significant if it can be related immediately to real practice in the classroom. If the trainees can not only see the realities of theory in practice but also contribute to the classroom practice in a quick and easy manner their learning will become more secure. Confidence was also gained by the joint nature of the process. Trainees were able to learn from each other and from the mentor. Although the technical side of the process was good in that students were able to see clearly the classroom and the various processes within it and hear the overall sounds within the classroom, it was felt that there would have been some gains from

microphones around the classroom so that trainees could focus on individual conversations and the learning achieved within them.

So going back to those early thoughts about reality TV, the benefits of instant access to the classroom and the ability to monitor and interact with that environment were found to be engaging and beneficial to the trainees. The future of this process in the training of Science PGCE trainees at Bishop Grosseteste University College is seen to be secure. We intend to consolidate the two sessions already described and develop their use in other ways like the developing relationship between teachers and pupils during the year.
All of these gains particularly possible because of the effective work between partnership school and ITT provider.

References

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